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Viewing cable 06CHIANGMAI79, NORTH KOREAN REFUGEES\' UNDERGROUND RAILROAD MAKING MORE

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Understanding cables

Every cable message consists of three parts:

- The top box shows each cables unique reference number, when and by whom it originally was sent, and what its initial classification was.
- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
- The bottom box presents the body of the cable. The opening can contain a more specific subject, references to other cables ([browse by origin](#) to find them) or additional comment. This is followed by the main contents of the cable: a summary, a collection of specific topics and a comment section.

To understand the justification used for the classification of each cable, please use this [WikiSource](#) article as reference.

Discussing cables

If you find meaningful or important information in a cable, please link directly to its unique reference number. Linking to a specific paragraph in the body of a cable is also possible by copying the appropriate link (to be found at the paragraph symbol). Please mark messages for social networking services like Twitter with the hash tags #cablegate and a hash containing the reference ID e.g. #**06CHIANGMAI79**.

Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06CHIANGMAI79	2006-05-25 05:07	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Consulate Chiang Mai

Appears in these articles:

<http://facthai.wordpress.com/2011/06/14/wikileaks-thailand-4/>

VZCZCXRO6936
PP RUEHDT RUEHHM
DE RUEHCHI #0079/01 1450507
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 250507Z MAY 06
FM AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0194
INFO RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI PRIORITY 0224
RUEHBK/AMEMBASSY BANGKOK PRIORITY 0476
RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL PRIORITY 0001
RUEHBK/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 0024
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 0006
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 0001
RUEHCN/AMCONSUL CHENGDU PRIORITY 0030
RUEHSH/AMCONSUL SHENYANG PRIORITY 0015
RUEHUM/AMEMBASSY ULAANBAATAR PRIORITY 0001

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 CHIANG MAI 000079
SIPDIS
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 5/25/2016
TAGS: [PREF](#) [PGOV](#) [TH](#) [KN](#)
SUBJECT: NORTH KOREAN REFUGEES\' UNDERGROUND RAILROAD MAKING MORE
FREQUENT STOPS IN NORTHERN THAILAND
CHIANG MAI 0000079 001.2 OF 004

CLASSIFIED BY: John Spykerman, Political Officer, Consulate

General , State Dept.

REASON: 1.4 (d)

Classified by PolOff John Spykerman for Reason 1.4 (d).

(C) SUMMARY. The flow of North Korean refugees crossing the Mekong River into northern Thailand appears to be increasing, as local Royal Thai Government (RTG) immigration and border police say they are at a loss on how to effectively manage the growing number of North Koreans who enter Thailand illegally after spending months on an Underground Railroad-style trek through China and into Thailand. Meanwhile, evidence suggests that the stream of refugees is unlikely to decrease, with a network of Christian missionary organizations in Thailand and southern China cooperating to bring in more refugees through Yunnan province, Burma, and Laos and into Thailand's Chiang Rai province, where most are detained and later sent for refugee processing in Bangkok and then on to South Korea. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) For several years, North Korean refugees have escaped their home country and, with the help of missionary organizations and paid travel brokers, made their way south through China and the Mekong River. Refugees can spend months or even years transiting China, an experience that leaves them vulnerable to exploitation and extortion. But increasing numbers are willing to take the risk. So far this year, Chiang Rai immigration officials have detained more than 100 North Koreans, compared to 108 in all of 2005 and just 29 in 2004.

¶3. (SBU) Following the arrest of an AmCit charged with transporting undocumented North Koreans in Chiang Rai, PolOff discussed the refugee issue with local officials and others familiar with missionary operations in northern Thailand and southern China. What emerged was a clearer picture of the path refugees take to reach Thailand, the lengthy process of detainment and transport to Bangkok, the role of missionary organizations in fostering these refugee movements, and the struggles faced by local officials and the refugees themselves once they arrive in Thailand. In addition, there are hints that future challenges await should this trend continue to overwhelm local authorities' ad hoc means of dealing with the issue.

The Long Road to Thailand, and Then Another Long Road to Bangkok

¶4. (C) The journey from North Korea to Thailand is long, arduous, and costly. Based on police reports and discussions with those who have met the refugees, the North Koreans tend to be women with children or older men, and only occasionally working age males. According to one person who has assisted RTG police with Korean translation, the refugees often spend months in China, working illegally to raise the funds to continue their trek to Thailand. Because of their illegal status in any of the countries they transit, they often endure exploitation and extortion by employers, travel brokers, and local law enforcement officials. Help does exist, however, in the form of Christian missionaries and churches, which assist some refugees to move through China and aid them once they arrive in Thailand.

¶5. (C) After reaching Yunnan province in southern China, refugees and their handlers attempt to blend in with the growing flow of river trade moving downstream to Southeast Asia. After a brief stop in Burma or Laos to plot their entry, refugees cross into Thailand in groups of 6-10 people. Handlers accompany the refugees into Burma or Laos and coordinate their crossing of the Mekong, with some reports estimating that several hundred North Koreans are waiting in Muang Mom district in Laos to cross into Thailand. Chiang Rai officials expressed frustration that their counterparts in Laos and Burma were unwilling to coordinate to better patrol the Mekong for undocumented foreigners. Since North Koreans are trying to reach Thailand anyway, officials in Laos and Burma apparently prefer that the refugees make their way unhindered as quickly as possible through their countries.

¶6. (C) Most refugees attempt to cross the Mekong at three points in Chiang Rai province – near the towns of Chiang Saen

and Chiang Khong opposite Laos, and Mae Sai opposite Burma. These three river ports, located in Thailand's tip of the remote Golden Triangle border area, are the most convenient and safest places to cross. Police say refugees arrive well-dressed with two changes of clothes and around 300-400 yuan (about USD 40-50) on hand. Once on land, most are quickly spotted by law enforcement and brought to the local jail. There an initial assessment is made and within two days they are sent to Chiang Rai for prosecution (normally a 1,000-baht fine, about USD 25, or five more days in jail). Following that, refugees move to an immigration detention center in Mae Sai for up to a month before being transported to Bangkok, where the RTG, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and South Korean Embassy resolve their cases.

A Modern Day Underground Railroad

¶7. (C) The May 6 arrest of AmCit Phillip Martin, a 26-year-old college student living in Chiang Rai initially charged with helping six North Koreans cross the border illegally at Chiang Saen, drew attention to the role Christian missionaries play in the operation of the Underground Railroad-style network of refugee movement. Although Martin first came to Thailand as a missionary six years ago, a subsequent investigation of his case has led post to conclude that he was probably not part of an operation to smuggle refugees into the country, and that he likely, as he said, picked up the refugees on a road near the river thinking they were Japanese tourists who had missed the last bus back into town. Police told PolOff they have reached the same conclusion and hope to bring the formal charges to an end shortly. However, investigations by post and local police into this case and others reveal hints of a complex network of organizations throughout Asia working to help refugees escape North Korea, transit China, and reach UN or Republic of Korea Government (ROKG) offices in SE Asian capitals.

¶8. (C) A Chiang Rai police report given to PolOff lists some organizations in Thailand that police suspect to be behind the refugee flow, including the Korean Presbyterian Mission in Thailand, which has an office in Chiang Rai. Provincial officials estimate there are about 700 Korean nationals living in the province, most involved in missionary work. Korean and American (including Korean-American) missionaries are well-represented in northern Thailand. Most Christian organizations cater to local hill tribes, but some take advantage of Thailand's relatively secure confines to serve as bases of support for missionaries in neighboring countries, such as China, where operations are forced underground.

¶9. (C) Because of ongoing police efforts to identify refugee contacts among the local Korean population, few local Koreans or American missionaries are willing to speak openly about what they know. Still, some suggested that the network of local missionary organizations coordinating with their counterparts inside China has been in operation for years, even if the numbers of refugees detained by local police has surged only recently. Indeed, in a high-profile 2004 incident, Korean-American missionary Jeffrey Bahk drowned while helping refugees cross the Mekong from Burma. Those with connections to the missionary community told PolOff they believe organizations in Thailand are in constant contact with China-based missionaries, who facilitate North Korean refugee movement through southern China. Left unsaid are whether missionaries make the trip from Yunnan to Thailand themselves and to what extent Thailand-based organizations assist refugees here and know of specific arrivals.

Policies Made in Bangkok Leave Locals Feeling Left Out of the Loop~

¶10. (C) While local officials are aware of agreements among the RTG, South Korean Embassy, and UNHCR to process cases in Bangkok, many say they feel trapped between efforts to enforce immigration laws and operate within the confines of these

discreet agreements on how to handle North Koreans. Chiang Rai officials know little of how their counterparts in Bangkok resolve these cases, while South Korean diplomats rarely visit the area personally. In fact, officers from the Japanese Consulate General in Chiang Mai have made more recent inquiries on North Korean refugees to local authorities than the South Korean embassy, according to one official. Because of this disconnect between Bangkok and provincial officials, many fear the status quo procedure used now to detain refugees may not hold up to increased numbers coming across the river, especially given a lack of funds at the provincial level to meet the costs associated with detaining refugees.

¶11. (C) As with any attempted border crossing, police first attempt to ensure that anyone trying to cross illegally does not reach the shore, and suspicious looking boats are turned away. But police realize this action is futile – if they force a boat to return to Laos with North Koreans aboard, the refugees will simply try again and again until they are successful, as Laotian government officials have no interest in detaining refugees who are trying to leave Laos anyway. Police fear that as word spreads that arrests lead to processing in Bangkok and eventual resettlement, ever more North Koreans will attempt to enter Thailand in Chiang Rai.

¶12. (C) More refugees will further drain local resources and capacity to manage the situation. Chiang Rai officials and others who have interacted with these refugees say police and immigration officials are straining to cover the food and transportation costs associated with detaining and moving the refugees. Moreover, police have no staff translators and are largely reliant on local volunteer Koreans for help. UNHCR is serving as an intermediary between the Thai government and the ROK Embassy in an effort to assist local authorities in these areas. The ROKG has told UNHCR it will provide funding and is currently considering proposals provided by the RTG that would include discreet funding for translators and facility upgrades.

~ While Refugees Face a Harder Time in Local Custody

¶13. (C) John Lee, a South Korean national who owns a guest house in Chiang Rai and has helped local police with Korean translations, said he has noticed that as the local legal system is overrun with refugee cases, it is less able to adequately care for those being detained. Lee said that on a recent visit, refugees asked him for help acquiring food and said they were not getting enough from immigration officials. Lee and others believe that local police confiscate the refugees' money, keeping it for themselves or using it to buy the refugees' food. Lee and others said refugees were not getting proper medical attention and suffered from fatigue and other ailments after their long trek.

¶14. (C) Although Chiang Rai police insist nearly all North Korean refugees crossing the Mekong seek to get caught soon after reaching Thai soil rather than make their own way to Bangkok, other observers believe more were crossing uncaught, as word spread that conditions inside local detention centers were harsh, with the goal of heading toward Korean churches in Bangkok before formally requesting asylum. With little public funds with which to move refugees through the legal system, local police catch some North Koreans, liberate them of their funds, and send them on their way unreported, Lee said.

COMMENT: More Refugees Could Seek Asylum Outside of RTG-ROKG Process

¶15. (C) If word continues to spread that Chiang Rai officials are less able to securely and humanely detain refugees before sending them to Bangkok, it is likely refugees may seek more direct routes to Bangkok outside of any agreed-upon process between the RTG and ROKG. Furthermore, if reports that the ROKG is reducing incentives for refugees to move to South Korea are true, it is possible more North Koreans may seek relocation to

third countries, a development that could increase walk-in asylum requests at our embassies and consulates in Thailand and elsewhere. Efforts by the RTG, ROKG, and UNHCR to better fund Chiang Rai operations will improve the humanitarian conditions of the refugees being detained, but it is unclear whether a moderate boost in local capacities can keep an ever larger number of refugees fully within the legal system as it is now structured.

¶16. (C) Post has been extremely cautious in pursuing this information, as we are acutely aware news of North Koreans recently resettled in the U.S. combined with an increasing inability of local RTG officials to handle the flow of refugees across their northern border may draw more attention to USG locations as targets for asylum requests. However, it is evident that missionary organizations and refugee handlers are focused on bringing more North Koreans through China and into Thailand in the near future. The recent rise in the numbers crossing the Mekong may yet be the tip of the iceberg.

MURPHY